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ABSTRACT

Research on popularity during childhood and early adolescence suggests that children who are perceived as popular by peers are not necessarily the same children who are sociometrically popular. This study extended previous research on popularity by examining children's perceptions of popularity. The study used open-ended questions instead of peer nomination only and also examined gender and differences. Participating was an ethnically diverse sample of 92 children in the fourth through eighth grades. Subjects were asked to provide free descriptions of four types of peers: popular boys; popular girls; unpopular boys; and unpopular girls. Their responses were coded for content and valence. Stepwise discriminant function analyses were conducted to determine how well children's answers discriminated among the four types of peers. Repeated measures analyses of variance were performed with participant age, gender, and status as between-subject factors. The findings indicated that popular targets were described most frequently as physically attractive and socially competent, while unpopular targets were described primarily in terms of physical unattractiveness, infrequent social interaction, and deviance. Girls tended to hold more negative stereotypes than boys did, especially regarding popular girls, and older children placed more emphasis on physical appearance than did younger children. (KB)

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Content Analysis of Children's Stereotypes About Popularity: Developmental and Gender Differences

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Abstract

The present study extended previous research on children's stereotypes of popular and unpopular peers. An ethnically diverse sample of 92 children in fourth through eighth grade were asked to provide free descriptions of four different types of peers, popular boys and girls, and unpopular boys and girls. Children's responses were coded for their content and valence. Stepwise discriminant function analyses were used to determine how well children's answers discriminated among the four different types of peers. Also, repeated measures ANOVAs were performed with participant age, gender, and status as between-subject factors. Results showed that popular targets were described most frequently as physically attractive and socially competent, while unpopular targets were described primarily in terms of physical unattractiveness, infrequent social interaction, and deviance. Girls tended to possess more negative stereotypes than boys, especially regarding popular girls, and older children placed more emphasis on physical appearance than did younger children.

Introduction

Past research has shown that children who are sociometrically popular stand out because of their prosocial behavior skills. Sociometric popularity is derived from children's judgments of who they like. However, if children are asked who they perceive as popular, rather than who they like, a different picture emerges. Children who are *perceived* as popular by peers are not necessarily the same children who are *sociometrically* popular (e.g., liked by a majority of peers). Instead, they tend to be sociometrically controversial (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998) and seem to be distinguished from their peers based on social impact, power, and dominance rather than likability (LaFontana & Cillessen, 1998). The disparity between sociometric and perceived popularity seems to be particularly strong in early adolescence (Merten, 1997), suggesting that this phenomenon may be related to the unique social structure of early adolescent groups.

The present study extends this previous work in the following ways. First, we examined children's perceptions of popularity by using open-ended questions instead of peer nomination methodology only. Second, to examine gender differences, descriptions were solicited from male and female perceivers regarding both male and female targets. Third, developmental differences were examined by collecting data in fourth through eighth grade.

Several predictions were made for this study:

1. Children's criteria for determining what makes someone popular or unpopular will differ from the criteria that traditionally distinguish sociometrically popular and unpopular peers.

2. Because the nature of the peer group changes as children move into adolescence, older children's stereotypes about popular and unpopular peers were expected to deviate even more from the traditional profiles of sociometrically popular and unpopular children than would the stereotypes of younger children.

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3. Based on past studies (e.g., LaFontana & Cillessen, 1998), girls were expected to have more negative stereotypes about popular peers than boys would have.

Method

An ethnically diverse sample of 92 children in fourth through eighth grade, 46 boys and 46 girls, were asked to describe four different types of peers: popular girls, popular boys, unpopular girls, and unpopular boys in response to open-ended questions (e.g., "What are popular girls like? What makes them popular with the other girls in their grade?"). These questions were asked as part of a one-on-one interview performed during an after-school program at a public elementary school in a large Northeastern city. Children's responses to each question were coded for their content (classified into one of 27 different categories) and their affective tone or valence (on a scale of -4 to 4). From the initial 27 categories, 9 content categories were derived: physical appearance, academic ability, social competencies, athletic ability, deviance, liking and friendship, frequency of interaction, power and dominance, and social behavior. Each category was further split into positively and negatively valenced answers, following a procedure similar to that of Rogosch and Newcomb (1989).

Results

For each participant, the proportion of positively and negatively valenced answers from each category describing each of the four targets was calculated (mean proportions are shown in Figure 1). Other graphs were created to display content (Figure 2) and valence (Figure 3) separately. Notice that in general, popular targets are described positively and unpopular targets negatively, with several notable exceptions. Popular targets, especially popular girls, are described negatively in terms of their dominance and social behavior.

Stepwise discriminant function analyses were used to determine how well the children's answers determined the perceived popularity of boy and girl targets. Group centroids show that for the three resulting discriminant functions, the first distinguished unpopular from popular targets, the second distinguished popular boys from popular girls, and the third distinguished unpopular boys from unpopular girls. Analyses revealed that targets who were perceived as popular were described as attractive and talented; targets perceived as unpopular were described in terms of unattractiveness, infrequent social interaction, and deviance. The standardized discriminant function coefficients for each category, along with group centroids for the various target groups, are presented in Table 1.

To examine perceiver effects, repeated measures ANOVAs were performed separately on the content and valence scores for each category, with perceiver age (older vs. younger), gender, and status (popular vs. average vs. unpopular) as between-subjects factors and target popularity and gender as repeated factors. Highlights of these results are summarized below:

Popularity of Target:

Unpopular targets were viewed more negatively than popular targets on all variables except academic ability, dominance, and social behavior. Children referred more often to deviance, $F(1, 61) = 5.25$, $p = .025$, and infrequency of interaction, $F(1, 61) = 9.67$, $p = .003$, when describing unpopular children and dominance when describing popular children, $F(1, 61) = 5.88$, $p = .018$.

Gender of Target:

Unpopular boys were described in terms of academic ability (or lack of ability) more than the other targets, $F(1, 61) = 3.99$, $p = .050$, while popular boys were described in terms of athletic ability more than the others were, $F(1, 61) = 4.86$, $p = .031$.

Age of Perceiver:

Older children referred more often to physical attractiveness, $F(1, 61) = 6.21$, $p = .015$, and frequency of interaction, $F(1, 61) = 9.94$, $p = .003$, when describing what made peers popular or unpopular, while younger children referred more often to academic ability, $F(1, 61) = 4.55$, $p = .037$.

Gender of Perceiver:

Girls tended to possess more negative stereotypes than boys, especially regarding popular girls. Boys referred to liking and friendship more often than did girls when distinguishing between popular and unpopular targets, $F(1, 61) = 3.89$, $p = .053$, while girls referred more often to infrequency of interaction when describing unpopular targets, $F(1, 61) = 5.93$, $p = .018$.

Sociometric Status of Perceiver:

Sociometrically unpopular children made less of a distinction between popular and unpopular targets in terms of their physical attractiveness than did sociometrically popular or average children, $F(1, 61) = 4.53$, $p = .015$.

Conclusions

According to the results of the present study, children in middle school and junior high possess stereotypes about popular and unpopular peers that differ in important ways from the profiles of sociometrically popular and unpopular peers that developmental researchers have determined in past research. Being popular in this age group seems to be associated most strongly with being powerful, interacting frequently with peers, and possessing talents and attractiveness, rather than being associated primarily with prosocial behavior and likeability. This discrepancy between sociometric and peer-perceived popularity increases with age among 9-13 year-old children. Future research will examine the further development of these popularity stereotypes as children move into adolescence and young adulthood.

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Table 1

Standardized Discriminant Function Coefficients, Standardized Group Centroids, and Percentage Correctly Classified for Descriptions of Popular and Unpopular Boys and Girls

	Four Popularity/Gender Groups		
Category	F1	F2	F3
Antisocial	--	--	--
Athletic	-.36	.64	-.12
Attractive	-.48	-.24	.24
Beneficently Powerful	-.12	-.45	.17
Competent/Talented	-.43	-.43	.06
Deviant	.37	.10	-.02
Disliked	.27	.22	.39
Frequently Interactive	--	--	--
Good Student	--	--	--
Incompetent/Untalented	--	--	--
Liked	-.35	.21	.19
Manipulatively Powerful	--	--	--
Normal	--	--	--
Poor Student	.31	.08	.77
Prosocial	--	--	--
Rarely Interactive	.41	.22	.17
Unathletic	--	--	--
Unattractive	.42	.09	-.47
Canonical Correlation	.70	.35	.22
Wilks' Lambda	.43	.84	.95

	Standardized Group Centroids			Percent Correctly
Group	F1	F2	F3	Classified by Function(s)
Popular Boys	-1.18	0.45	-0.05	57.6
Popular Girls	-0.73	-0.54	0.13	43.5
Unpopular Boys	1.12	0.20	0.27	46.7
Unpopular Girls	0.79	-0.11	-0.34	70.7

Figure 1. Amount of Use of Positive and Negative Descriptions in Each Category to Describe Popular and Unpopular Boys and Girls

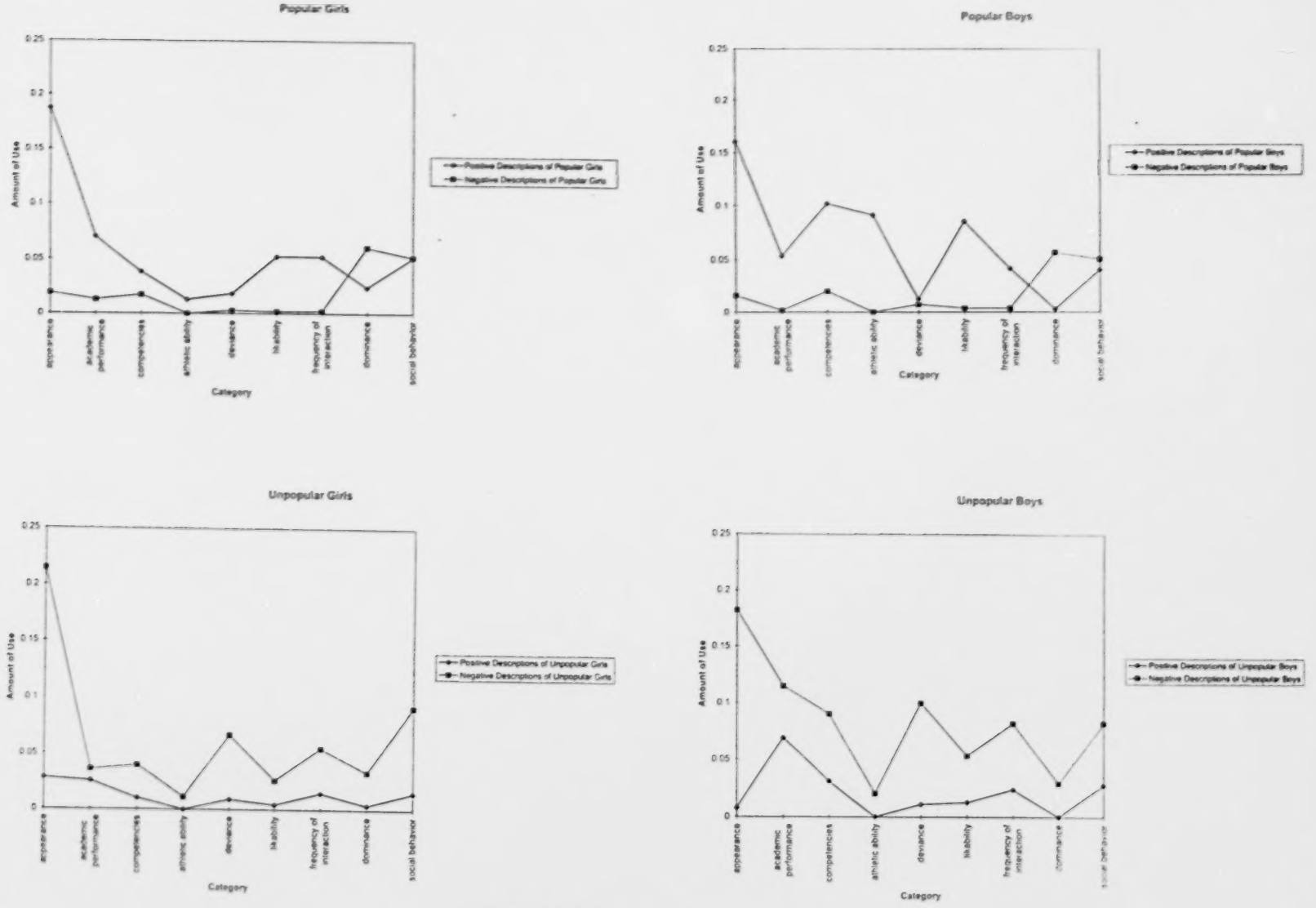

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Figure 2 Content of Stereotypes of Popular and Unpopular Boys and Girls

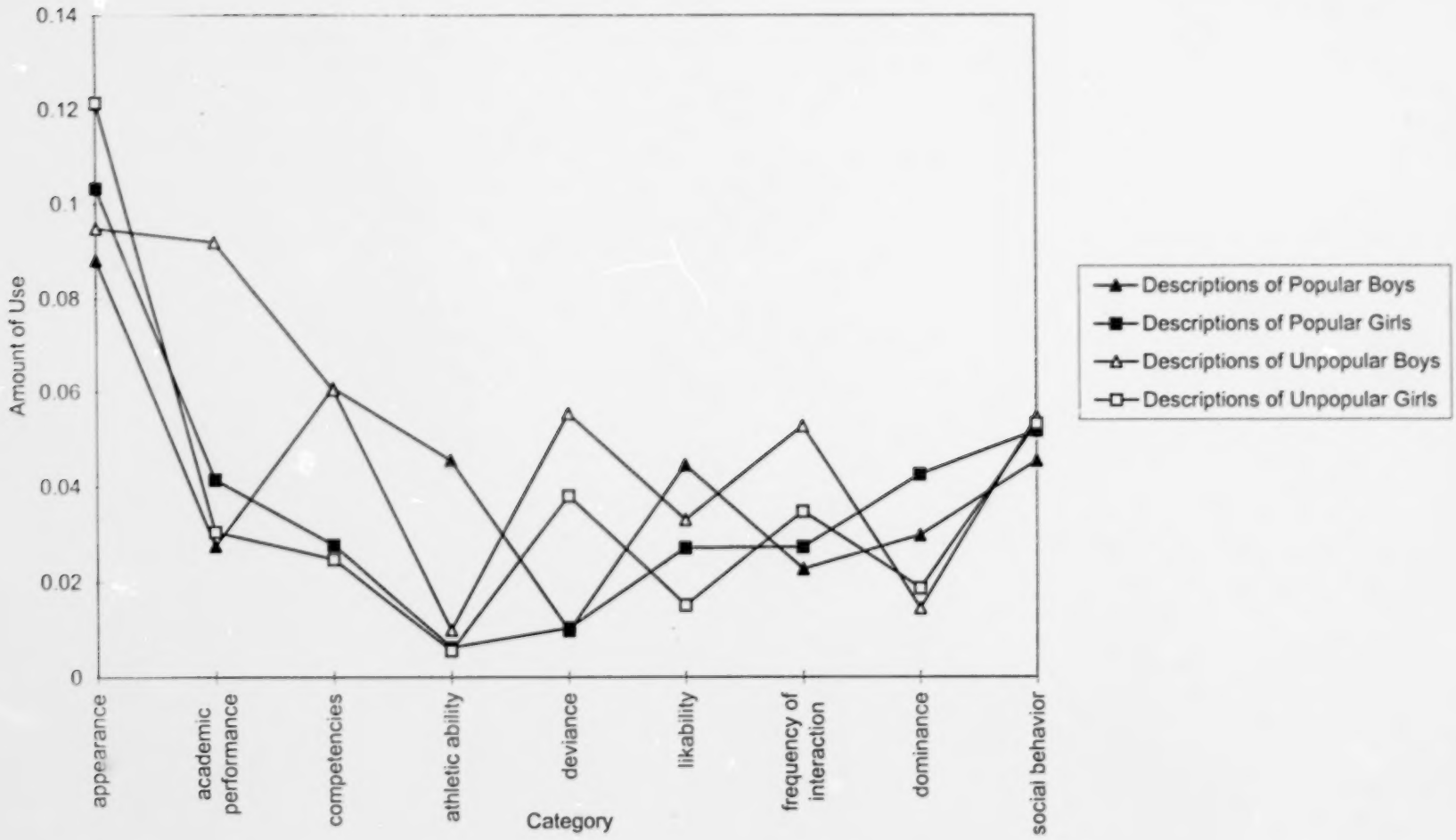

Figure 3. Valences of Descriptions of Popular and Unpopular Boy and Girl Peers